

Fatigue: A Society Problem

With today's emphasis on fatigue, safety and duty of care, how different is transport to the rest of society on these issues?

Productivity, recovery time, sleep, rest and workplace safety. All of these issues have become somewhat of a society problem. Fortunately transport is not the only industry faced with the hard and very real decisions about what to do and how to manage the process.

I was talking about safe working practices and fatigue with friends over a glass or three of "vino" and some great pasta. In amongst this close knit group were some newcomers. As the night grew on, I noticed one gentleman on the other side of the table was becoming extremely sleepy (and I will add it was not the wine).

Cutting a long story short, he told us he'd just put in an extremely long week with only about three hours of sleep per night over the last seven days. His occupation? A resident doctor. His wife was also a nurse. Both knew the pitfalls of working very long hours while fatigued.

The couple told many stories about being students, having to stay up all night to study, even missing exams because they had fallen asleep. I asked them why they did these long hours. He replied, "Because it is a part of our lifestyle. We might not like to work long hours, but we choose to do it because we both love what we do and it is our profession."

After explaining the problems which the transport industry has in relation to "legislated hours of service", he then used a fitting analogy. "We can't just stop in the middle of a heart bypass. They are our patient, it is our responsibility." It struck me that the road transport industry is not all that different from many other industries or workplaces.

The fact is, fatigue and safe working practices are society issues. And part of the answer – in any industry –

TABLE 1	What Causes Fatigue in our Workplace	Ways to Reduce Fatigue in our Workplace	Completed by Who & When

is to identify the risks and manage them. Also, you do not have to be a genius to work out that – if you invest money in training staff – you are going to achieve better results. WHY? Because staff are better informed and make fewer errors.

You can start by asking yourself the following simple questions. It will help to identify the need for workplace training.

1. Do you employ staff at the last minute, sometimes not allowing enough time to conduct a full induction?
2. Does your staff make repetitive, simple mistakes?
3. Does your workplace have mountains of paperwork, which nobody understands?
4. Are your staff complaining they are always tired?
5. Has the accident rate increased?
6. Do not have enough time?
7. Do you have simple communication problems between departments?
8. Does your staff report workplace incidents?

How did you fare? Personally, I believe the best way to develop training packages and actually make things happen is quite simple. Let's use 'fatigue' as an example. Rule up a sheet of paper so it looks like Table 1 (above).

Call small group staff meetings and ask what they feel causes

fatigue in their working environment. You may want to help start them off. This is the first step in identifying the problems and taking corrective measures. The important thing is to identify who is going to implement them.

Senior management support and contribution is crucial. You may find things you cannot change. But you'll definitely find cost-effective and beneficial ways to improve current practices. Anyone can do it, you just have to WANT to do it. It is also important to revisit the list occasionally to ensure each area is progressing.

This is a simplified version of risk assessment – a subject that can become very complex. My advice is to start simple and effective (not everything within your business is in a text book). For those short on time, e-mail me for a copy of the format which you can modify to suit your own business.

Do it!

Recommended web sites this month are: www.transearch.com.au – a handy transport internet directory, and www.heartfoundation.com.au – health info to distribute in newsletters to drivers and staff. Best of all, it is an Australian site.

Stay safe.

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